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AN ACADEMIC SERMON¹

The prevalence of the notion among all sorts and conditions of men that they could have done better in another calling than in the humdrum one they have chosen has been often made the subject of ironical comment. Their attempts, periodic or spasmodic, to give concrete proofs of their versatility — that is, to furnish evidence that their notion is not ill-founded — have also afforded satirically inclined persons occasions for laughter. Sometimes, however, a thoughtful mind probes far below the surface and finds in the phenomenon material — if not for philosophy, at least for poetry. You will remember the exquisite use Browning made of Raphael's century of sonnets and of the angel Dante painted. I thought of Browning's poem the other day when I picked up a volume by the distinguished French critic, Jules Lemaitre. It was entitled "*En Marge des Vieux Livres*," and, instead of being a collection of essays on literary masterpieces, it was a group of short stories or *contes* developed by the writer's imagination or fancy from a starting point found either in the Iliad or the Odyssey or the Gospels or the Golden Legend. Eleven years before, M. Lemaitre had published a similar volume entitled, from the leading story, "Myrrha." Six years before that, as far back as 1888, my friend the English scholar, the late Dr. Richard Garnett, had also found here and there among the old and strange books he was guarding in the British Museum thoughts and fancies that had germinated into quaint stories, which he had collected under the title of "The Twilight of the Gods." The Frenchman's tales were the more graceful and charming; the Englishman's the more witty and bizarre. I am here concerned with their volumes, however, only as they illustrate in the field of literature the prevalence of the desire to succeed in some other than the chosen, the natural field for our talents, or at least, the field which the public in its rough and ready fashion has come to regard as proper to them.

¹ Read before the Men's English Graduate Club of Columbia University, March 16, 1906.

The tyranny of the public in making these rough and ready judgments has been the subject of frequent complaint. Lincoln's statesmanship, as we all know, was long discounted because of his reputation as a humorist. I bought a copy of the first edition of Dr. Garnett's tales from a Holborn bookseller at a shockingly low price, and, as I sat reading it till a late hour in my lodgings, I was impelled to meditate upon the irony of fate that plants nine out of ten of us on a little plot of calling or career and, with more authority than Canute's, exclaims, "Thus far shalt thou go and no farther!" There is no use in kicking against the pricks, or in pursuing the subject — especially as I am only abusing the privilege of being allowed an introductory paragraph or two by approaching my real topic of discussion along as circuitous a route as I can contrive to take.

Well, why not? Am I not condemned to lecture, week in and week out, in as straightforward and formal a way as I can compass upon authors, authors, authors, until I am tempted to wish, either that the greatest Author of all had blotted out what we flatter ourselves to be his fairest work, or that there could be a real book-burning Omar, who would have the sense to preserve a few volumes of great poetry. Let me then continue to meander long enough to remark that in all the illustrations I have given of attempted incursions into other than the chosen fields of activity a certain artistic fitness of choice may be discovered. No vulgar striving, no sordid discontent, no flagrant metamorphosis is here such as may be seen in the proverbial sunday-school superintendent who becomes an absconding cashier, or the exemplary bourgeois who endeavors to make a place for himself as a leader of society. Proseman wishes to show that he too can write verse, painter that he can sing and poet that he can paint, critic that he can tell stories and novelist that he can criticise — these are the innocent aspirations and delusions we are considering. Dante, painting his angel, anticipated Dryden in thinking — naturally, he could not quote him:

For Painture near adjoining lay,
A plenteous province, and alluring prey.

And Browning was charitable or enthusiastic enough to write some six centuries later:

You and I would rather see that angel,
Painted by the tenderness of Dante,
Would we not? than read a fresh *Inferno*.

Easy rhetorical question for the poet to ask — neither picture nor fresh “*Inferno*” being among such possibilities even as the

One precious, tender-hearted scroll
Of pure Simonides,

of which Wordsworth dreamed and sang. It is well enough when your attempts in an untried field are lost or safely locked up in your drawer — I refer specifically to the love poems you have all written when you should have been grinding away at your dissertations; — it is another matter when your precious bantling appears between boards or is hung in an exhibition room. Then you wonder at your temerity and begin to think that the cynical old world is right when it avers that a shoemaker should stick to his last — *ne sutor supra crepidam*.

It is time, however, for me to make the reason for my circumambulations unequivocally plain. I am merely, not so much whistling for want of thought, as talking to get my courage up. I want to desert the chair for the desk or the pulpit — only for a few moments, it is true, but my hesitation is none the less genuine. Preaching in season is something we are at least inured to; preaching out of season is what we all resent, clerics perhaps most of men. Even a President of the United States sermonizes at his peril, much more a poor professor. But a sermon, after the “firstly” has rung its knell, is less formidable than a sermon that has proceeded for some minutes without a text to stand on, yet with infinite possibilities of dragging its slow length along.

You will find my text in Cowper’s “Task” (I. 749), which runs:

God made the country and man made the town.

This text I wish to apply to an educational problem quite different from any that Cowper discussed in his “*Tirocinium*.” We have heard much of late about the prospective disappearance of

the small college, which in its ideal state is essentially a rural or a village institution. I am not such a partisan of the small college as to affirm that God made it and man the great urban university, nor do I intend to discuss upon normal lines the question of its prolonged existence and usefulness. While I believe that the high-school is bound for more and more of our young men and women to fill the function performed by the gymnasium of the Germans and furnish all the preliminary training that is needed for university studies in the arts, the sciences, and the professions, and while I believe further that in many colleges the shortening of the course that is now permitted to exceptional students, and the blending of professional and strictly academic studies in the curriculum that leads to a bachelor's degree, will produce a radical change in the work of culture for which such colleges stand, I see no reason why this vast country, with its many social strata, its inequalities of wealth, its variety of inhabiting stocks, its chaos of ideals — none the less real for the true unity of sentiments and aspirations that underlies the indefinite something we denominate Americanism — should not find ample use for all the small colleges now in existence and for more than are likely to be founded in the near future. In other words, I suspect that the so-called problem of the small college and the university is not so much a phase of the universal problem involved in the catch expression, "the survival of the fittest," as it is a phase of the equally universal problem set before all persons and institutions that have an ideal to live up to. It would be nearer the mark, perhaps, to say that these two problems have their bases in the fact that one and the same truth is looked at from opposite sides. Persons and institutions that live up to their ideals are, in the large, the fittest to survive, and do survive. And in very real ways the college and the university help one another to survive. We are probably inclined to over-emphasize one of these ways — the passing of students from the college to the university. That is important, but, as I have said, the chances seem to be that the college-trained university student will occupy in time to come a less and less important position as compared with the school-trained student. We may flatter ourselves that he will always occupy a more aristocratic

position because he will come to the university bearing the stamp of an institution possessing traditions and an *esprit de corps* that no public high-school is likely to develop. But aristocratic positions may be a positive disadvantage in a vast commercial democracy or a huge socialistic state, and what sort of political entity America will be in a hundred years no man living is wise enough to know. It seems wiser — at least for tonight — to look at another beneficial relation that obtains between the university and the college — the relation involved in the fact that more and more the college faculties are being manned by specially trained university students.

Here again, of course, we find ourselves confronted with the phenomena of a process of evolution. The old college professor, who was only too likely to be a broken down or unsuccessful clergyman but was also in many cases a man of genial culture, is rapidly being displaced by scholars of more special equipment, though often with less experience of life and less adaptability to their responsible positions. Even if the college should play a less important part in the future than it has played in the past, the opportunity of the college professor to make for the spread of true culture must continue to be great, and it is a matter of considerable moment to the country if the college faculties are today being recruited from men whose training has been necessarily passing from the broad to the narrow rather than from the narrow to the broad. Fortunately, however, life is like a battle — it is very seldom fought out on precisely the plans previously formed or without calling for many a departure from the lines of method in which its participants have been trained. In teaching, as in everything else, the spirit counts for more than the letter, and it is upon the spirit in which you young scholars should leave the university, as most of you must do in the nature of things, and take up your work in the colleges that I wish to dwell for the remainder of this sermon. I shall speak mainly to those whose lot is likely to be cast in the rural or village college or the large private boarding school rather than to those who are likely to enter city colleges or high-schools; because at present the former class, if not still the more numerous, has at least more of a tradition to keep up, and because remarks that

fit the one class will be applicable with but slight modification to the other.

Leaving a great university involves giving up many advantages, among which may be enumerated the opportunity to frequent large libraries, laboratories, museums, theaters, and similar public institutions, the general stimulating energy and movement of city life, and last but not least, the special inspiration imparted by contact with a vast body of workers in one's own sphere of activity. I have known few students who did not want to stay in the metropolis. I have never failed to recommend their going to a small college or a good school as preferable to their taking a minor position in a university. I recognize that the university position affords certain marked facilities for the training of scholars, and occasionally furnishes an opportunity for distinguished and speedy academic advancement; but I think that the teacher and the man are more important than the scholar, and I doubt whether the university is so good an agent for the making of teachers and men (after they have ceased to be students) as the college or the school. The university, in my judgment, tends to overpower, to dwarf the individual, to normalize him, to urbanize him. His manners and clothes gain greatly through this process; I doubt if his mind and character gain in like measure. In our profession, as in that of literature, it is a good thing to grow up in the provinces and sometimes to live there always, with only an occasional visit to the urban centres. True, the provinces are narrowing; they produce a plentiful crop of commonplace and eccentric people. But they afford more leisure, more retirement, more opportunity for individual thought upon life and its problems; they make more requisition on our social capacities; they put less premium on specialization. All things considered, my judgment is that the country is a better nurse of strong character than the city, the college than the university. I suppose many would deny this; but, the longer I live, the less I am impressed with the essential independence of the mind and character moulded by large cities and large institutions. It is independence, thoughtfulness, creative energy, and versatility that one should mainly want to see every student display. Accuracy of scholarship and neatness of

method, and general urbanity rank below those qualities, and I think there is more chance of the greater qualities being developed by the man or woman that leaves the university than by the man or woman that stays.

This belief of mine, which I hold in spite of numerous experiences tending to disprove it, has been strengthened by some recent utterances of men in comparatively high positions — utterances which would scarcely have been made by men much in the habit of doing that unfashionable something known as meditating. Action, as you are well aware, is the watchword of this transcendent generation. One almost trembles when one dares to suggest that thinking has a modest part to play in life, public or private — especially when one reads in the newspapers letters proposing that laws be passed to punish all who dare to criticise men in high stations. Some day a sapient person will perceive that the best way to put an end to unpleasant criticism is to pass a law against thinking. If you think nothing, good or bad, you are sure to acquiesce in the wisdom of all the powers that be — political, ecclesiastical, academic. And the powers that be, with their natural bent for observing the laws, will be equally innocent of thought, and will have all their time for action. Then surely, in our expressive parlance, we shall “make things hum.”

But a truce to such treasonable remarks. Everyone knows that in this fortunate country no important action takes place that is not dictated by the *vox populi*, which is only another name for the voice or the wisdom of God, even when it appears to be megaphoned, to apply the words of Milton, through the seven-fold possession of a desperate stupidity. All that I wish to remark is that I think the *vox hominis* is a little more respectable than the *vox populi*, and that if you will use well the opportunities for study and reflection afforded you in a small college, you will have a very good chance, when you do talk, to talk with the voice of a man.

Now for a few words as to the drawbacks of the small college position and the way to face them so as to keep them from neutralizing its advantages.

I suppose that we will all place first the wearing number of hours of instruction and the wide range of subjects. This is an

evil inseparable from small endowments, but one that is being diminished in the older and wealthier colleges. Like all other inevitable evils it should be borne with as much cheerful patience as possible. Observe, however, that it generally comes when one is young and strong, that it tests one's endurance, makes one combat one's laziness, develops one's versatility, one's resources, one's powers of self-preservation. I am a living proof that it is entirely possible to teach eighteen hours a week in a bewildering range of subjects—I blush to say that at a pinch I have been known to teach French and German, mathematics and the history of the English law of real property—I repeat that it is possible to teach a multitude of subjects and not completely lose one's health or one's self-respect. It is even possible at the same time to do some writing and editing. The way to do it is not difficult. Avoid thinking or talking much about what you have to undertake, but when you see that a thing needs doing and that people look to you to do it, go ahead and trust in Providence to bring you out with something accomplished. Dunning, the great lawyer, a member of Johnson's club, said that a third of his immense business was done by himself, a third got itself done, and a third never got done at all. I suspect that he was a very wise man. All hard workers, as a matter of course, will grow weary and brood and play the martyr; but if they manage to be in the main good-natured and energetic, they will be able someday to look back on a good deal of fair accomplishment, and although they will be ready to admit that they made mistakes every day and wrote and said and did things of which they were later ashamed, they would have been much more ashamed if they had not displayed "the courage of imperfection," and done their best under trying circumstances.

Now you see there is very little about the over-work of a college instructor that is new to me, and I can tell you honestly that I do not regret my trials. I learned much about human nature that I could never have got in any other way, I learned to work, to save time, to carry several things together; but the best of it all was that there was little danger after that training that I should lie awake at night wondering whether I had offended this or that student in my last class, or let a typograph-

ical error slip by in my last article. It seems to me that a small college is a very good place to get a fairly sensible philosophy of working and living. So make up your minds that there is a real jewel in this particular toad's head of adversity, and remember that the only true recipe to follow under the circumstances is—think as little of yourself as you conveniently can and as much as you can of the needs of the institution and your students. You are sure to get on then and, as the years go by, the chances grow less and less that the excessive dissipation of energy in a large variety of interests, from which I undoubtedly suffered, will be required in an American college. I may add that, of course, a certain amount of method in one's use of time is necessary, but that there is no laying down rules. Some people work by bits, some by great stretches. Some take their rest and amusement by rule and measure; others follow up a spell of labor by a spell of incubating. All that you must work out for yourselves. Only remember that perhaps the main secret of efficient work under pressure lies in a borrowed phrase I have already used "the courage of imperfection;" and that that involves a lack of self-conceit. The man who refrains from doing a thing because probably he will not do it to his own liking is not in my opinion often actuated by the artist's desire of perfection, but is actuated by the fear of censure that so dominates the self-conscious and the conceited man.

Next to overwork I suppose we must place the lack of the appliances of culture—especially of books in sufficient quantity. Here again I have had plenty of experience, but I have always managed to surmount my difficulties. I was careful in buying for myself—getting fundamental books and seeing that they covered certain topics fairly well. I went as far as I could go in any line of research, and then waited patiently to get to a library or else got friends in other places to lend me books. Fortunately there has been a great extension of the facilities for obtaining such loans since my early days. I made up my mind that doing my teaching as well as I could and not doing work involving research was the business of nine months out of my year. And, finally, I could always afford to have books to read. What is lacking in such situations as mine was and yours may be, is books to refer

to. No man in these days of cheap books has occasion to complain that he cannot get enough to read. And here is a beautiful compensation. The scholar, strictly speaking, is often very ill-read. You as teacher rather than scholar can read widely if you will, and your work as teacher and your character as man will improve with judicious and wide reading and, in important respects, you will often be better off than many a university instructor. You will have fewer distractions too — such as the theatre — and, books being a little more seriously taken in the provinces, you will be less exposed to the danger of becoming a dilettante or an amateur. I have noticed among men in large universities a tendency to amateurish reading or else to grinding, mechanical scholarship. Wide, sane reading makes the fuller man, and you can do such reading even in the smallest college. You may publish fewer monographs and special articles, but when you do get a chance to do a piece of research, it will have qualities all the larger if you have read widely. And by all means labor to make your college library better; for thinking of those who are to come after you will keep you from brooding too much over your own lack of appliances. I may add that the small college library often brings one into more intimate contact with books than is possible in a large library. One is not swamped by them — one can easily get the run of the library in several departments. One can handle more books and much may be picked up in that way. Finally, in this matter of reading, let me emphasize two points. Read all the time you are not teaching, playing, eating, and sleeping. I mean this almost literally, if you can stand it. Tuck in your five minutes here and your ten minutes there, unless you are sure you can employ them better in thought, as you often can. In the next place do not be discouraged at what you forget and do not fail every now and then to calculate how small a number of books you could read if you read ten hours a day for sixty years — small I mean as compared with the number a wide-awake reader would like to read. And keep up all the languages you have and live in hopes of adding to them — even if you have to admit that you will probably be eighty like Cato before you begin Greek.

A third drawback to work in a small college is what I may call

in general the cramping environment. Though I have already said that I regard the city as perhaps more cramping so far as concerns originality of thought, it would be folly not to admit that the country and the small town have their own ways of cramping. There is considerable temptation to become lazy and humdrum, and many college professors yield to it. The chief correctives are love of work, living to a certain extent your own intellectual life, keeping up with literature, seizing legitimate opportunities to travel. There is a superfluity of gossip in a small place, and that means that sooner or later you will wonder at the meanness of men. You will keep on wondering both at their meanness and at their foolishness, but trying not to be mean one's self will always take one's mind off the injury another's meanness has done one. It is pleasanter and safer to think of the many kind deeds of which one has been the beneficiary and, take it by and large, I suspect that there is as much mean intriguing and quarreling in big as in little places. Hearts are made to ache everywhere, and, although a mean man is perhaps less easily avoided in a small faculty than in a large, still I think that if you attend to your business, you will have little to complain of. And one great advantage you will have. Men and women may be mean and stupid, but boys and girls are generally the reverse of mean, and the fresh qualities of youth make up in a measure for their stupidity. You can more than make up for the cramping gossip of the small place by having more intimate contact with your students than is usually possible in a large university. No matter where you go — North, East, South, or West — you have a splendid opportunity here. You may never do much to extend the bounds of knowledge, but how much you can do to extend the bounds of character — to make the new generation advance upon the old! This is the noblest thing connected with learning — this handing on the torch. I need not dwell on it, but I must say that next to the family relations those established between teacher and student seem to me the loveliest and truest. What are a host of books and articles one has written, if one has taught all one's life without having made a host of real friends? I think that there is no reason why you should not make friends by your teaching and also friends by your books; but by all

means make friends somehow. Only let me remind you that the friends made by any derogation from your office are not worth having. I have watched this carefully, and I have never seen the rule fail. Any carelessness with students as to the college regulations with regard to cards, drinking, or what not — any questionable conversation — and you forfeit some of their respect. They want us to respect ourselves and our office. They do not want us to talk about athletics and betray our real ignorance of the subject. They may laugh at a questionable joke, but they will take it out on us in private. They want us to be true to them, and we cannot be that unless we are first true to ourselves.

I am aware that this is very didactic, but that is what I started out to be. And, to continue, you will avoid the mistake of trying to conceal your ignorance — who can? — and that rarer, almost worse, mistake, if you are dealing with older students, of trying to reserve some of your knowledge in order to publish it or exploit it in some way for your own behoof. The only thing a true teacher has a right to deny to any of his pupils is an exhibition of the bad side of his own character. I do not mean by this that he should be at all hypocritical. I mean only that we all have faults and angularities, and that we ought to try to keep these from offending our students in any way. To our knowledge, our zeal, our time they have full claims — and above all to our sympathy. And here let me call your attention to one special danger which I have observed in more than one place at close range. If you find that you have a strong influence on any student or set of students, it may become your duty to check that influence at a certain point, even if you have to suffer a wrench in doing it. The relation of master and disciple is a beautiful one, if the master continues always to respect the disciple's individuality, and the disciple respects himself. But, when the teacher makes himself the center of a circle of flattering student admirers, when he seeks to impress his ideas of literature and life upon them instead of trying to develop them into independent seekers after truth, he loses sight, I think, of the true meaning of education, which is a drawing forth of the character implicit in every child and youth, not a grafting or substi-

tution of another character. I frankly say that I think the presence in any college or university of a strong personality that in whole or in part spends its strength in producing immature copies of itself is a source of danger. A true stimulator, a true maker of men is a blessing; but I do not believe in the teacher who

Like Cato gives his little Senate laws
And sits attentive to his own applause.

From Plato to Pater this sort of teacher has been known in the world, and while he has often created beautiful things in literature, he has generally managed to raise ugly, if unjust, suspicions about his own manliness, and that of his intimate disciples. There is such a thing as over-intimacy between teacher and pupil. There is such a thing as settling down on a youth's individuality and vampire-like sucking all the life out of it. Any really high-minded man would scorn to be surrounded by flatterers, and would shun the temptation to try to make out of his pupils anything but strong, independent men and women. Is not the respect and love of a few such worth all the adulation, all the trumpeting, and all the advertising in the world? And is it not a sign of doubt as to our own strength and largeness if we cannot devote ourselves to training up men and women to surpass us in our own lines if they can? Any teacher who is capable of being jealous of his pupils, who is afraid to see them grow up to their full stature or to have them come under the influence of other men is truly pitiable. But there are such teachers, and my warning is not useless.

I might go on giving you advice forever, and flattering myself that I was merely indulging in the privilege of lengthened utterance claimed by the preachers of old, but you would soon give me ocular demonstration that times have changed. So I will add but one bit of counsel. It seems to me to be a very good thing to have some piece of writing going on even if one can find but an hour a week to put on it. Write an address for a literary society or club, accept invitations to speak throughout the State, write an occasional review—in other words, do not neglect creative and more or less formal work, for the time may come when you will have to do or will want to do not a little of it.

And have at least one line of reading on which you do practically no writing or talking. It supple the mind and furnishes the needed element of disinterested culture. Always to read pencil in hand and card-catalogue in reach is deadening. Always to talk and never to write promotes garrulity, and not a little slipshodness. And now, checking my own garrulity, I will end as I began by assuring you that life outside a great centre has its special advantages and that its peculiar disadvantages can undoubtedly be neutralized in part. There is a fine field of work before you in the colleges and schools, and, when you return, in whatever capacity, to your university *alma mater*, you will find your old teachers, with their beards growing grayer each year, delighted to hear of your success.

W. P. TRENT.

Columbia University, New York.